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TRAINING FOR THE “POLITICAL” WAR

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During a coffee break discussion that one esteemed colleague refers to as the “kaffe klatsch,” we addressed a scenario depicted in a recent work on our efforts in Iraq. The scene is familiar. An officer arrives in theater to discover the unpredictable environment surrounding him. In this case, he comments that he has found himself in a “political” war and not a “military” war.

In listening to our discussion, the “pure” civilian in our group asked, “Don’t you guys read Clausewitz from the time you are lieutenants?” To which we all replied, “Yes.” The real response, however, is much more a result of age, experience, and culture.

The easy explanation is age. We in the military devour Clausewitz in our military school system. At the junior level though, this is merely a memorization of principles. “Fog of war,” “friction,” and “war is an extension of policy by other means”¹ are terms with which we are all familiar. These are taught, but rarely understood completely, at the lieutenant or captain level. Experience kicks in at the field grade level, and the deeper understanding with the transition from training to education begins. Or one would think. This is where our media culture violently nudges us back to our earlier comfort levels.

We live in a media world in which “politics” has a bad reputation and news cycles are filled with stories of the fallen politician. In fact, our heroes are those who win against the political (read “unfair”) bureaucracy. In the 1960s, it was “standing up to the man.” In the 1970s, Serpico, when offered his gold shield, asked “Is this for being an honest cop or for being stupid enough to get shot in the face?” In the 1980s, it was Johnny Rambo telling the colonel (of course he had to wear a green beret) “do it for them,” and, last, we all remember the Navy lawyer putting his career on the line only to be told by the Marine colonel, “You can’t handle the truth.”²

We love these scenarios because it renews our faith in our individual selves. Americans are noble and defend the little guy. Sometimes we forget (a lot) that war and defending the little guy is an ugly drawn-out business. After all, how many movies have you seen about the Berlin Airlift since the one Richard Widmark made in the mid-1950s?³ How about the myriad biopics of the diplomatic exploits of General George Marshall? In reality, probably the last time we saw the little guy truly bring down the

big guy was when Woodward and Bernstein began the chain of events which ended the Nixon administration. You see my point.

We see the “military” war in our “pop” culture—the attack, the victory, the defeat. Rarely do we see the policy leading to the conflict nor do we study the policy implementation after the conflict. Our Professional Military Education (PME) system has to compete with those media-supplied comfort levels.

Our young officers are learning many unique skills not normally taught through our PME system. Many have had to become “mayors” of towns and negotiate with factions that they were locked in combat with only days before. The enemy is the car bomber, and the uniforms are not distinct. These self-taught skills are perishable and, if we are not careful, will be lost until we have to teach ourselves (again) in the next conflict.

Our challenge is to identify and preserve these perishable skills and institutionalize them in our PME system. The time to do that is now. The Army has a tradition of reorganizing after conflict, and there are those who are looking already for another “peace dividend.” It is important to not let these experienced leaders walk at the end of this conflict. We must make the assignment of these leaders to our PME institutions appealing through incentives of promotion and assignment so we can properly train the next generation and resist the subtle nudge to go back to what is comfortable. At the same time, we must not forget the conventional piece of our business, for it is as important to teach the lieutenant the mechanics of the hasty attack as it is to teach the art of negotiation.

An interesting side note is that our new Secretary of State referred to a 3-legged stool of American foreign policy in her opening remarks at Foggy Bottom last week.⁴ War is policy or politics by other means. Always has been, always will be.

Our banner declaring, “mission accomplished” merely heralded the end of the conventional phase. The surge and beyond focused on the remaining Clausewitzian moves; the fog and politics. The latter starts prior to the conflict and can continue for an indefinite time. We must use our age and experience to counterbalance culture and prepare our future leaders for the next continuation of policy by other means.

ENDNOTES

1. Bernard Brodie, “A Guide to the Reading of On War,” in Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., *Carl Von Clausewitz, On War*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 645, 649.

2. The movies *Serpico* (1973), *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985), and *A Few Good Men* (1992), respectively.

3. The movie, *The Prize of Gold*, 1955.

4. The actual remarks were, “There are three legs to the stool of American foreign policy: defense, diplomacy, and development. And we are responsible for two of the three legs.” See www.state.gov/secretary/.

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